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ABSTRACT

Criticism of the schools has been linked to calls for change and demands for school improvement. While much of the attention has focused on curriculum content, student knowledge and skills, and school duration, considerable attention has been directed to the school principal and the importance of school leadership. Strong, effective leadership provided by the building administrator--specifically, instructional leadership--has been identified as a key characteristic of effective schools. To determine whether principal selection has been influenced by this new focus on the instructional leadership aspect of educational administration, a questionnaire was sent to 187 of the 337 public high school principals in Tennessee; returns were received from 144 subjects for a response rate of 77%. The study sought to distinguish principals chosen at an earlier time from those chosen more recently in order to assess whether principal selection criteria had changed, the type of selection criteria used; and whether these criteria reflected new conceptions of the role. Findings indicate that no standard or systematic process is in use for principal selection. Further, the absence of differences between new and old hires in areas such as background, preparation, and experience suggest that new conceptions of the role of principal have not--or not yet--changed selection criteria, at least in Tennessee. (35 references) (KM)

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PRINCIPAL SELECTION IN A TIME OF CHANGE

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PRINCIPAL SELECTION IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Reminiscent of the post-Sputnik era, education has been experiencing a tidal wave of criticism. From within and outside of education, educators, industrial leaders, politicians and presidents have decried the state of education and the products of that education (Education Commission of the States, 1983; The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; The Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Policy, 1983; Sizer, 1984; Boyer, 1983; Goodlad, 1983; Bush, 1989).

Criticism of the schools has been linked to calls for change and demands for school improvement. While much of the attention has focused on curriculum content, student knowledge and skills, and school duration, considerable attention has been directed to the school principal and the importance of school leadership (Education Research Service, 1983; Hallinger, 1983; Greenfield, 1982; Griffiths, Stout and Forsyth, 1988). The executive director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals concluded, "After three decades during which leadership has been expected from everyone else, the 1980's could be the decade of the principal (quoted in McCurdy, 1988, p.5)."

Another force has propelled the principalship into the limelight. Research on the effect of school-related variables, begun in the late 1960's, (Coleman, 1966; Jenks, 1972; Plowden,

1967; Averch, 1972, for example) and on school effectiveness, i.e., what distinguishes more effective schools from less effective schools; schools where student performance is not predictable on the basis of student socio-economic status, begun on the heels of that research, (Hawkridge, 1968, 1969; Weber, 1971; Klitgaard and Hall, 1973; Edmonds and Frederiksen, 1978; Brookover, 1976, 1977, for example) led to the identification of the principal and of the leadership provided by the principal as a key variable in whether or not schools had an effect on student achievement. While not the only factor to emerge from the research, strong, effective leadership by the building administrator, and more specifically, instructional leadership, were identified as key characteristics of effective schools (Cohen, 1981; Mozzarella, 1977,1981; Shoemaker and Fraser, 1981; Cotton and Savard, 1980; Clark, Lotto and McCarthy, 1980; Clark, Lotto and Astuto, 1984). As concluded by the U.S. Office of Education study of ESAA programs,

> Strength of administrative leadership was a major factor in the schools' ability to improve student achievement. There was consistent evidence that improved achievement was more likely to be found in schools whose principals a) felt strongly about instruction, b) effectively communicated their viewpoints about instruction to teachers...,c) took a dominant role in decisions about the selection of instructional materials and in program planning and

evaluation, and d) emphasized academic standards...(Coulson, 1977, p.43).

There is little or no disagreement with the assertion that principals should be leaders in their building, and in particular, instructional leaders. There is less agreement about what it means to be these, with how principals go about the process of being leaders, or whether current officeholders, chosen with other criteria in mind, can or should reorder their priorities to emphasize instructional leadership.

It has been argued that the role of principal has always included an instructional dimension, but that the realities of school life have tended to emphasize the managerial dimension of their work. Studies of what principals do demonstrate that the majority of their time is spent in brief, unplanned, verbal interactions only distantly related to instruction. Van Cleve Morris, et. al (1984) found that less than 10% of the principals' time was spent in classrooms, and both Martin and Willower (1981) and Greenfield (1982) found that administrative tasks and duties commanded the major part of principals' time and attention. This is not necessarily what principals want; however, it is what they believe they are compelled to do in the press of the situation. In their study of The Effective Principal, Blumberg and Greenfield (1980) argue that principals may honestly want to be instructional leaders, but in the reality of schools, "find

themselves besieged on a daily basis with the nitty-gritty administrative tasks involved in keeping the ship on an even keel, in maintaining the existing order in their schools." Nevertheless, even in the face of these pressures, some principals (so-called effective schools principals) have made or maintained leadership as a central focus.

Principal selection remains an unsystematic, undocumented process (Cornett, 1982). Political considerations, local custom, "fit", and fitting in are believed to be primary, unidentified criteria used in the process (Baltzell and Dentler, 1982). Given changes in thinking about the position, it is reasonable to ask, to what extent has principal selection been affected by changing thinking about the role? Do newly selected principals differ from longer holding officeholders? Has principal selection changed in this time of change?

The purpose of the study was to begin to examine those questions. It sought to distinguish principals chosen at an earlier time from those chosen more recently, to examine if they differed from one another, and if they did, to assess if the differences reflected changes in selection criteria.

PROCEDURES

A questionnaire was sent to a computer-generated, random sample of 187 of the 337 public high school principals in Tennessee. They were identified from the State Department of Education Directory of Public Schools, 1986-1987. High school principals were chosen because they represented a discrete, manageable group, because a body of literature profiling the high school principal existed as a basis for comparison and substantiation of changes, if such were found, and because prior research on change in the gender profile of school administrators over time (Mertz and McNeely, 1988) had shown the high school principalship to be a pivotal position for studying the effects of change.

The questionnaire requested information related to personal demographics, including gender, race, place of birth, and location of the high school from which the principal had graduated. It also requested detailed information about the principals' educational preparation and field/area of study, prior experience (teaching, coaching. administrative and other), career path, and current school and position. Subjects were also asked whether or not they had been through an NASSP Assessment Center.

Returns were received from 144 subjects for a response rate of 77%. One hundred sixteen white males, 16 black males, and 12 white females responded to the questionnaire.

The data were analyzed in three ways: as a whole, by old and new, and by race and gender. (1) Data were aggregated as a whole to develop a composite profile of Tennessee high school principals to use as a basis of comparison. (2) Data from new principals, those serving in the high school principalship for five years or less, were analyzed and compared with data from old principals, those serving more than 5 years. (3) Data from white males, black males and white females were analyzed separately and compared, for the group and in terms of old and new, to see if race and gender were factors in any differences that might be found.

Data were analyzed using simple statistical procedures, totals, means, ranges and percentages. Questions asked in the questionnaire were analyzed using the most appropriate of these tools. Data about career path were analyzed inductively for patterns and descriptions.

FINDINGS

In Tennessee, as in the nation, the overwhelming majority of high school principals is white and male. Of the 144 respondents, 82% (116) were white males, 10% (16) were black males, and 8% (12) were white females. Thirty-eight percent (55) respondents were "new" principals, having served five years or less, and 62% (89) were "old" principals, having served more than five years. Of new principals, 74.5% (41) were white males, 11% (6) were black

males, and 14.5% (8) were white females. Of old principals, 84% (75) were white males, 11% (10) were black males, and 5% (4) were white females.

The mean age for the group as a whole was 47.13 years. White males were the youngest, when looked at by group, with a mean age of 46.92 years; white females followed, with a mean age of 47.35 years; and black males were the oldest by group, with a mean age of 48.87 years.

As a group, the principals had served in the position for 8.68 years (mean). Males had served longer than females. White males had served an average of 9.01 years, black males, 8.33 years, but white females, only 5.09 years. A larger percentage of female principals were new (67%), than either white males (35%) or black males (38%).

Eighty-five percent of the principals were native to the state of Tennessee, and 42% were native to the county in which they were serving as high school principal. Eighty-five percent (99) of white males, 75% (12) of black males, and 100% (12) of white females were native to the state. Thirty-eight percent (44) of the white males, 62.5% (10) of the black males, and 50% (6) of the white females were native to the county in which they were now principal. New male principals were less likely to be native to the state of Tennessee than old male principals. Seventy-six

percent (31) of new white male principals and 67% (4) of new black principals, versus 96% (68) and 80% (8) respectively, were native to the state. All of the female principals were native to the state, both old and new. New white male principals were slightly less likely to have been native to the county in which they were serving, 37% (15) versus 39% (29); 50% of both new and old white female principals were native to the county; but while 80% (8) of old black male principals were native to the county, only 33% (2) of new black principals were native to the county.

All of the principals had begun their careers as teachers. They had served as teachers a mean of 9.57 years. On average, white females had served longer, 10.73 years, than black males, 9.87 years, or white males, 9.4 years. New principals, irrespective of their race or gender, tended to have served about the same number of years, 10+. For white and black males it constitutes an increase in years in the position as compared to old principals. For white females, it constitutes a decrease in years. Old female and new black principals constitute the groups with longest tenure as teachers prior to moving into administrative positions. New white males had served an average of 10.32 years, old, 8.89; new black males, 10.83, old, 8.8 years; new white females, 10.25 years, old, 13.25

In terms of the subjects they had taught as teachers, a wide range of subjects was represented, within and among groups,

however a few subjects stood out for each group. For white males, 29% (34) had taught physical education, 19% (22) social studies, 15% (17) vocational education. For black males, 31% (5) had taught science, 12.5% (2) mathematics, and 12.5% (2) physical education. For white females, 25% (3) had taught English, 25% (3) elementary school, and 17% (2) home economics. When the data were examined in terms of old and new, by total group and by gender and race, the subjects that stood out remained the same.

Sixty percent of the principals had coached one or more competitive sports prior to becoming a high school principal. There was a noticeable difference in the number and percentage by gender. Sixty-four percent (74) of white males and 63% (10) of black males had coached. Only 17% (2) of white female principals had coached. As a group, 61% of old principals and 58% of new principals had coached. By race and gender, however, there were notable differences in percentages. Sixty-eight percent (28) of new white male principals had coached versus 60% (45) of old principals; 67% (4) of new black principals had coached versus 70% (7) of old black principals; 50% (2) of old white female principals had coached versus 0% (0) of new white female principals.

In terms of prior administrative experience, of the total group, 69 had had experience as high school assistant principals, 18 as elementary school principals, 16 as middle school principals, 15

middle school assistant principals, and 17 as central office administrators. New principals were more likely to have served as high school assistant principals, and less likely to have served as elementary school principals. Fifty-six percent of new and 43% of old principals had been high school assistant principals; 13% of old, and 10% of new had been middle school principals; 9% of old and 11% of new had been middle school assistant principals, 9% of new and 11% of old had been elementary school principals, and 13% of new and 11% of old had been central office administrators. However, when the percentages are examined in terms of race and gender, marked differences emerge in the pattern of prior experience for three positions, high school assistant principal, elementary school principal, and central office administrator.

New white male principals were more likely to have come from the high school assistant principalship than old white male principals, and new white females were less likely than old ones to have come from that experience. Sixty-one percent of new versus 37% of old white male principals had been high school assistant principals; 50% of new versus 60% of old black principals had been high school assistant principals; 38% of new versus 100% of old white female principals had been high school assistant principals. No blacks, old or new, had come with experience as elementary school principals or central office administrators. The percentage of new white males with experience

as elementary principals has decreased (old, 16%; new, 7%) and the percentage with central office experience has increased (old, 10%; new 12%). The percentage of females with elementary school experience has remained the same (25%), and the percentage with central office experience has increased (old, 25%' new 38%).

Only 7 respondents had been through an NASSP Assessment Center. They were all white males, 4 old, 3 new. No blacks or females had been through the process.

DISCUSSION

In the face of changes in the way the role of principal is being defined - or at least talked about - we sought to find out if principal selection had been influenced by the changes. The primary problem was how to get at an answer to that question. A simple, direct approach would dictate asking those directly involved in principal selection whether the criteria they were using had changed or what criteria they were using, and inferring whether these criteria reflected new conceptions of the role. However, this kind of approach was both impractical and unsuitable for getting the information sought.

First, it is not entirely clear who to speak to, i.e., who actually is involved in principal selection. As noted earlier, there is no standard or systematic process in use for selection principals. Second, even if those persons could be identified, it

is far from clear that the criteria-in-use, i.e., what they actually use to select, would be a part of their conscious awareness, or if it were, that they would be comfortable sharing them.

The limitations of a direct methods dictated the use of a less direct, less precise method of getting at the question, i.e., seeing if new hires differed from old hires, and extrapolating from that data. Thus, extreme caution was used in drawing implications from the results.

There were few differences between new and old hires and where differences were discernable, they tended to be small and less than suggestive. This was true in all aspects studied save one, gender. Females constituted a larger percentage of new hires than males, and differences between new and old hires were largely a function of gender, i.e., attributable to differences in the newly hired female principals.

The appointment of increasing numbers of females to a position that was, in the past, largely, almost exclusively reserved for males, indicates a change in selection criteria, an important one. It is still true however, that both new and old high school principals are far more likely to be male than female, white than black. While not necessarily a part of the conscious selection criteria, these factors appear to continue to influence the

selection process.

The absence of differences between new and old hires in areas such as background, preparation and experience suggest that new conceptions of the role of principal have not - or not yet - changed selection criteria, at least in Tennessee. It may be that it is too soon to assess the effects of change, that the change is too slight to discern, or that there has been no change other than the hiring of females. Whatever the case may be, the results of the study raise questions about whether all of the talk about new roles and instructional leadership is just that, talk!

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